



# From Witching to Wells

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In anger Moses struck a rock with his staff and water gushed forth (Numbers 20:9-11). Written histories of ancient civilizations give hints and magic formulas for finding water. The first detailed description of a divining rod or witching stick is in Johannes Agricola's "De Re Metallica," a description of German mines and mining methods (1556). Divining rods were used to locate mineral deposits in England under the reign of Elizabeth I, and eventually water dowsers held that their powers in using the rod came from God. The dowser's popularity progressed rapidly:

1518 - Martin Luther proclaimed the use of the rod a violation of the First Commandment.

1660 - Jesuit Father Gaspard Schott denounced the divining rod as an instrument of the Devil.

1775 - Newspapers began to mention divining rods in connection with witches and witchcraft.

1826 - Two articles appeared in the American Journal of Science condemning water witching.

1969 - Much of rural America promotes the use of dowsing techniques for locating water and there are more than 25,000 active diviners in the United States.

The instruments of a dowser or water witch or diviner may be a "Y"-shaped peach or willow limb. Some use straight sticks, metal rods, keys, coat hangers, pliers, pendulums, boxes, batteries, electrical instruments, or lights. Dowzers claim to find water primarily but do not limit themselves to one claim (necessarily). They may attempt to diagnose disease, trace lost animals, reestablish property lines, locate precious metals, analyze personal character, or determine the sex of an unborn child.

Few areas exist in Missouri where some water cannot be found at some depth with some quality and therein lies the success of the diviner in our own state. Scientifically speaking, diviners are unable to match hydrologists for locating water and estimating quantity of flow and quality produced at any particular depth. Voluminous

*Bob Elgin, St. James, Missouri, demonstrates how his divining rods work.*



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publications have been issued on the subject of witching and in view of these studies the United States Geological Survey “considers further tests of water witching a waste of money.”

Much of the controversy stems from concepts as to how groundwater occurs. Diviners believe it is stored in veins, domes, and underground rivers. Actually groundwater seeps through the soil after rainfall and fills pores, cracks, and crevices in the rocks underground. Excess water evaporates or is taken up by vegetation; some drains into surface reservoirs and some percolates downward to establish and maintain the water table level. The water table is the top of the zone in which all openings of the rocks are saturated with water. A well extending into the water table will fill up to the level of the water table. If the surrounding rocks are porous or loose grained, water will flow fast and free. Rock formations of clay or granite are fine grained, almost nonporous, and give up water so slowly that they are impractical for man's purposes.

Tools and techniques used by the hydrologists are relatively simple. Water seeks its lowest level and obeys the laws of gravity; therefore it is more likely to be found under valleys than under hills. A hydrologist's main clue to location is the porosity of the bedrock. He uses the word aquifer for a body of rock that carries a usable supply of water. He gathers detailed information from other wells in the area that he is surveying for water. If no information is available he may arrange for test drilling to check the water-bearing formations and the quality and quantity of water available.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources' Geological Survey and Resource Assessment Division will assist homeowners and industry in finding an adequate water supply and in most cases can estimate where water may be obtained, its chemical composition, and generally, how much water is available. A copy of Water Supply Paper 416, *The Divining Rod, a History of Water Witching* by A.J. Ellis may be obtained from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

